

PERSONAL VERSUS POLITICAL AFFAIRS IN CHURCHILL'S *THIS IS A CHAIR*

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Abstract: There are plenty of issues in the world to petition and fight for, yet each individual also has “battles” at home to contend with. Which is of more importance? We often separate the two indefinitely. In studying Caryl Churchill’s work *This Is a Chair*, however, I would suggest the personal and political to be intimately related and possibly each even a causation of the other. To take care of one may be eliminating the problem of the other as well. Might political problems stem from petty, personal qualms? Even more specifically might jeopardizing moral norms affect the greater social order? If so, this would be a revelation and fresh pursuit in solving many of the monumental political issues which are faced today.

Keywords: personal issues, political concerns, human imperfection, Caryl Churchill, *This Is a Chair*.

The question raised throughout Churchill’s drama is the wavering value of personal issues versus political affairs, which begs the question, which is of most importance? There are plenty of issues in the world to petition and to fight for, y

et each person also deals with individual “battles” at home. One could argue this is a constant struggle for human beings living in an individualistic yet still semi-collective culture. Churchill suggests that the personal and political are intimately related. To take care of one may be eliminating the problem of the other. A well-practiced technique of Churchill is constantly taking the viewer from domestic levels to political heights. Might political problems stem from petty personal disputes?

For readers who have not read *This Is a Chair*, the structure of the play is as such: composed of seven short scenes, the play is only thirty-five minutes total and averages about four minutes per act. At the beginning of each scene, a political issue is flashed upon a projection screen. The characters then enter onto the stage and perform the scene. Largely the political side of the play is shown through the titles flashed before each scene. In turn, the personal view is revealed through the characters.

In focusing on the domestic (or personal) part of the play, each scene shares a common element of ordinariness. The characters face very common, day-to-day situations. For instance, in the scene titled “A War in Bosnia,” the characters Mary and Julian are simply talking outside on the street about plans they have previously made (a situation, most can relate to). Another common element the majority of the scenes share is the broken relationships of the characters. The level of brokenness in these relationships varies; however,

there is a conflict either taking place or quickly arising in each of them. For instance, Mary is in the process of leaving Julian for other plans she has made. Although Julian does not show any sign of immediate aggravation over the matter, the scene suggests that conflict lies ahead in the future for the pair.

Each of the scenes seems to also relay a certain ugly characteristic of human nature. For example, the scene described above of Mary and Julian may be commenting on our tendency to be unfaithful to commitments and prior arrangements. The word “arrangement” seems to be a key element in this scene of the play as Julian is waiting for Mary with an *arrangement* of flowers. This is a concrete symbol of their *arrangement* of plans they had made. The scene talks about the flower arrangement for a good section of the dialogue. However, Mary dismisses the “flowery talk” to tell Julian she must leave: “It was the arrangement made first you see and somehow it slipped my mind....can we make it another time?” (Churchill 2008, 42). In doing so, she is dismissing the flower arrangement and their social arrangement in one fell swoop. Once again, Julian does not show any sign of immediate anger towards her neglecting him. He simply states, “Don’t worry. There’s a cab” (*ibid.*, 43). He is, however, undeniably short with Mary after she tells him the news. Her character thus reveals the common fault of going back on one’s word.

The “Pornography and Censorship” scene is so brief it is hard to glean much from the characters; although, the implications of the six lines of dialogue are quite weighty. The father says in a threatening tone, “Muriel, if you don’t eat your dinner you know what’s going to happen to you” (Wolf 2002, 2). Wolf suggests an abusive relationship to exist between Muriel and her father, as well as the daughter having an eating disorder. I agree with this conjecture on the relationship, but the more significant aspect of this section is that Churchill does not give Muriel any lines. The fact that Muriel does not have any say in the dialogue also shows her lack of voice and power.¹ In this particular scene, the reader may gather two things: first, the often cruel abuses of power and dominion (as used by Muriel’s father) and second, the true lack of voice many have in the democratic system and in the world. This scene arouses both senses of shame and empathy for certain persons.

The scene, “Genetic Engineering,” concerns the characters Eric and Maddy who think they have heard a bomb while getting ready for bed. Although, they end up dismissing the idea and deciding it must have been something else, it seems they would not simply be able to go to bed after discussing such a thing. Rather, it seems one would inquire further and be more concerned. This may reveal the human tendency to dismiss large problems as insignificant. As the characters make their way to bed and discuss their bathing habits, it may be Churchill’s way of saying “wake up” to those who are sleeping amongst gigantic troubles. Clearly one should not be able to sleep while a bombing is happening right outside the bedroom window.

The sensation of Eric and Maddy is reminiscent of watching the news in the safety of a home. On television a range of horrific scenes taking place throughout the world flash up on the screen. You may flip through the channels and see a scene of a child with a protruding

¹ The role of voice is a noteworthy aspect of the play. It seems Churchill is reminding us we do have a voice by taking away the voice of some (such as Muriel). Also, by leaving the last scene free of dialogue, invites us to insert our own voice.

stomach starving in Africa or bombs flashing, showing the scene of the war in Iraq. These are the issues that constantly saturate the news and media. Although many may feel a pang of compassion when looking at these scenes, it is easy to dismiss them simply because we are removed from the situations. There is no sense of obligation or responsibility. So often we allow ourselves to feel that moment of compassion and then change the channel.

As the play progresses the characters inability to communicate effectively begins to digress. It is worth noting that this particular scene holds the longest dialogue, yet one could argue the characters say the least bit of substance in their given lines. Their sentences are choppy, hardly cohesive, and incomplete. This is a crucial maturation of the play, especially since as the language digresses, the importance shifts from the personal to the political. Kritzer notes:

Tom and Leo quarrel intensely and then make up: their emotions, though complete in a nonverbal sense, are given verbal expression only in fragmentary phrases such as “never did anyway” and “what the fuck you.” These phrases serve well enough to convey the general tone of the interaction, but do not define it in any specific way. What might otherwise have been an encounter between the two men over very specific issues instead becomes generic and universalized (2010, 59).

Suddenly the personal is swallowed by the political (universalized). The personal is sounding incoherent, thus the political issue flashed before the dialogue of the scene, “Hong Kong,” is what sticks in the mind of the audience. As the play begins with dialogue dominating the scenes and ends with the political issues taking precedence (due to the digression of language), Churchill seems to be giving each a time in the limelight. In doing this, she essentially erases the lines commonly drawn between domestic and political affairs, as we tend to box in what is going on immediately around us from what is going on in the world.

This technique of Churchill’s is a part of her “epic theatre” design. The idea behind the epic theatre is to make the audience aware that they are watching a play. She succeeds wonderfully in *This is a Chair*, in the sense that the flow is constantly stopped with the changing of scenes. The minute the audience could potentially connect with the characters, they are thrust into a new scene. Brecht also uses this in many of his dramas, including *Mother Courage*, in which he uses exaggerated qualities to keep the audience in direct awareness that they are watching a play. This technique is highly contrasted by authors of realist dramas, such as Arthur Miller. In Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*, perhaps his most famous play, the details and realistic circumstances of the play, along with the perpetual flow provide the audience grounds to become “lost” in the play. *This is a Chair* simply does not lend itself to that. The audience is quite aware throughout the entire play that it is performance.

Returning to the idea of the digression of language in the play, Churchill herself notes in “Hong Kong” that it is equivalent to raising the question, “How little do we need to hear to understand what’s going on?” (Churchill Introduction, viii). It is quite perplexing how much meaning can still be extracted from the jumble of words when the play is verbally read. Yet, it may test the patience of the audience in figuring out what is going on. Interestingly enough, this scene, in testing the patience of the audience to decipher the incoherent language, and

the lack of patience Tom and Leo show each other in their relationship, reveals another human flaw: impatience. This scene triumphantly reveals relatable characteristics of the audience and the characters in the play simultaneously, unveiling communication problems and the flaw of impatience both personally and politically.

Churchill is reinstating the fact that if one took care of personal problems, many of the global problems would be eliminated. "This is a Chair definitely addresses the tension of living in the modern age" (Jernigan 2004, 39). I do not completely agree with Jernigan's comment, because this "tension" he is speaking of is not new. This struggle to find the balance and importance teetering between personal and societal expectations is an ancient concept. This tension would hold true in a small, isolated village in ancient times. It also holds true in the twenty-first century. The only disparity is the different sizes of community people are a part of. As the world is becoming in a sense "larger," due to technological advances and traveling advantages, the responsibility of a person living today may be on a grander scale than one living in the eighteenth century, however, the concept is the same. With all of that being said, the constant struggle of living amongst personal problems and the bigger issues happening around the world is unmistakably difficult.

The pinnacle of the digression of language may be seen in the last heading, "The Impact of Capitalism on the Former Soviet Union," which is left without any dialogue to accompany it. Churchill invites the audience to enter a piece of their personal dialogue into the story. Although, whether Churchill succeeds in doing this, cannot be determined. The fact is that the audience, although submerged in the midst of the catastrophes is still removed as they are in the audience. They have no obligation to care or even consider any of the issues.

In focusing on the political part of the play, a number of grave, unresolved issues are presented by Churchill simply by displaying titles before each scene. This creates two possible effects on the audience. First it could spur them on to feeling like they want to do something about all of the issues. Or it could also simply turn into an over stimulation of issues. This is similar to the example of watching all of the disasters take place on television mentioned previously. The over stimulation of devastating events we are subjected to is overwhelming and often leads to complacency, considering the heaviness and weight the issues carry. In this same way, the titles would eventually end up losing all meaning for the audience and whether the titles were there or not would be equivalent. I would argue that the latter effect takes place while experiencing the play, which may have been the complete opposite effect Churchill had intended.

It seems the focus of the play itself is not to reveal statistics or facts about each issue, but rather human flaws through the characters. Although the issues displayed in each scene and the dialogues are seemingly unrelated, Jernigan suggests:

Perhaps if we forced the issue we could draw some analogy between the war in Bosnia and the events of the episode. Certainly many eastern countries have felt alienated by the European Union after the initial courtships, which led to the collapse of the Soviet Union (2004, 38).

I reject this idea simply because the relations are very minute. Also considering that any time you are looking for a correlation between two ideas, *some* common ground can be found. Any connections found between the titles and the play itself is intentional on Churchill's part. The intent of the play is not to educate the viewer, but rather to intrigue and

to provoke curiosity. In this manner, the play lives beyond itself. *This is a Chair* brilliantly juxtaposes fiction and non-fiction. True events are teetering with fictional characters. Leaving the audience feeling “unsatisfied” and in search for far more beyond the play is a true art in Churchill’s work.

The political titles do, however, have great significance when related to the personal flaws pointed out in the characters of each scene. For example, revisiting the opening scene with Julian and Mary: Mary in not keeping her word may be correlating to a government who does not keep their word. “The War in Bosnia,” may have stemmed from an untrustworthy government who broke a political arrangement and thus resulted the war. Perhaps in “Pornography and Censorship” as Muriel is forced to swallow something she doesn’t want to, it can be related to the lack of power an individual has in a democratic society. Often we are forced to “swallow” laws that we do not wish to swallow. Currently, in the United States, Obama has established Healthcare Reform that leaves many citizens in distress. However, besides petitions, besides complaining about it to friends and family, what can be done? The American people are forced to swallow the new Healthcare laws.

In the “Labour Party’s Slide to the Right,” the characters shifting blame to others correlates to political disagreements all over the world. How often does a government, after making a mistake, simply admit it was their fault? This happens rarely, if ever. Every country tries to *slide* blame to other countries, so as to not assume responsibility to make amends. As Maddy and Eric in “Genetic Engineering” ignore the huge problems all around them, how often do we claim ignorance simply because we do not want to deal with problems? The repercussions of the character’s actions hold grave political implications.

The title of the play itself is noteworthy. *This is a Chair* is a reference to Magritte’s art piece “This is Not a Pipe.”² The idea behind Magritte’s painting lies in the very suggestion that although the painting is of a pipe, it is only a representation. For as Magritte comments, “Could you stuff my pipe? If I had written “This is a pipe,” I’d have been lying.” Churchill mirrors this similar idea as the titles and scenes do not match up with one another: “In seeming Magrittean fashion, each scene has little to do with its title” (Jernigan 2004, 38). This also supports my claim earlier that the title and scene are not connected with one another.

Kritzer suggests, *This is Not a Chair* is claiming that the play does not have anything to do with the object of a chair (2010, 60). Rather, “the chair” is referring to a meaning in which people “agree to apply to a particular class of objects and, by extension, a leadership function” (*ibid.*). For example, one holds a political chair in a government position. This is significant in the discussion of the personal versus the political. Churchill takes the personal idea of a chair and the political association as well and once again blurs the lines between the two.

In all of the discussion and contributing elements Churchill uses to illuminate the relationship between the personal and the political, what conclusion can we arrive to? Do political problems stem from personal problems or the other way around? As seen in Shakespeare’s renowned *Romeo and Juliet*, the feud between the noble families of the Montague’s and Capulet’s arise from petty arguments between the head of each family.

² Magritte’s “This is Not a Pipe” can be viewed at the end of the article under photograph 1.

This quarrel is blown out of proportion as time passes until many lives are lost due to the argument of two individuals. After the fighting goes on for some time, it seems the people hardly remember why they were fighting in the first place. This example shows the sincere danger of allowing personal flaws to create political crises. Many of the monumental issues happening in the world today could be traced back to child-like disagreements between only a few individuals.³ This is not necessarily a novel *idea*, however, actually changing our actions would be. Many want to see political change world wide, but their call for change simply echoes and comes back void in the vast space of the globe. Starting with something small, starting with our individual choices, a small bit of integrity can grow into something much larger.

Although the flaws revealed in each scene of the play seem diminutive in significance, when taken in one dose in a thirty-five minute period, they cover a great multitude of human blemishes. The scenes with the characters do not directly correlate to the political issue paired with them, yet they collectively reveal an unabridged picture of the “insignificant” things we do on a daily basis which cause these monumental political tragedies to arise. Churchill contributes to the discussion of how to live amidst the crisis of being a flawed individual in an equally flawed world. If people began to focus more on the domestic issues and assume personal responsibility many of the political problems would evaporate. Perhaps monumental problems arise from smaller problems. Perhaps political problems do in fact arise from personal problems. At the very least, the relationship is undeniably, as suggested by Churchill, intimately connected.

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³ This may show a great flaw of the political system as a whole. It is dangerous to allow only a few to make decisions for the rest. Although democracy attempts to resist this danger, it may not completely settle this issue.

Photograph

Found at <http://www.spritestitch.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/magritte-pipe.jpg>

